

## HOW TO RETURN HOME AFTER WORKING ABROAD



Landing a top [job in London](#), [Frankfurt](#) or another overseas locale can be one of your greatest career achievements. But before you accepted the assignment, did you consider how your international experience will look to employers when you're ready to return to the U.S.? And did you wonder whether you and your family will be able to make a successful transition back to an American lifestyle after living abroad?

These issues often are overlooked by executives who accept overseas assignments quickly. The experiences of many expatriates show that moving home to look for work after living abroad is rarely easy, and typically requires lots of preparation and networking while still overseas.

"If you're planning to move back to the U.S. in a role equal in level, challenge and compensation to your assignment abroad, it will take time, extensive use of your network and a lot of effort," says William Meyer, who spent nearly 10 years working in Europe for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). "Resources to assist in your long-distance job search are hard to find" outside of the U.S., he says.

### War Stories Abound

Ask seasoned expatriates about the challenges of [job hunting in the U.S.](#) after being away for several years, and you'll be inundated by war stories. Most say that networking helped them land new positions at home, but never without lots of effort.

If you're currently working overseas and are thinking about returning, you should start by determining if you're really ready to leave. Many expats are independent, driven, energetic people for whom the challenge of an assignment abroad is too appealing to give up, even if their positions are eliminated. They've often been given a wide range of responsibilities and are considered experts in their field, two characteristics that can be tough to duplicate in the U.S. Instead, some decide to concentrate on finding another overseas position.

The roles available overseas were much beyond anything I was offered in the U.S.," says Frank White, who spent two years in Europe before returning to a new position in San Jose, Calif. "This was a very difficult adjustment for me for quite a while."

Even if you have a job waiting at home, lower compensation in the U.S. presents another challenge. While abroad, you may have received expatriate benefits that allowed you to live far better than you could in the States. The thought of returning to a simpler life may seem attractive, but you'll likely be surprised by how much conditions at home have changed, especially if you've been away two or more years.

"Your old friends will seem different," says Glen Gomez, who returned to the U.S. in 2013 after a three-year European assignment with a semiconductor company. "You'll have grown and changed a lot, while they may have gone a different path."

Many returnees also say they miss the cultural aspects of living abroad. Dan Yermo, who spent five years working in Japan, England and Belgium with California-based networking company, says that "coming back to the U.S. was a culture shock. We expected things to be familiar, but found that our friends had different interests and seemed to expect us to drop our international perspectives and fit immediately into their lifestyle. As an American who's lived outside the States for many years, you become a hybrid."

That you've grown and changed while living abroad should influence where you decide to live in the U.S. when you return. "You may want to choose a location where there are a number of international residents," says Juliane Andrews, an executive search consultant in Boston. For example, "if you're returning from Germany, you may consider an area with a strong German-American society." While some companies don't offer geographic flexibility when you're ready to return, others do. IBM Corp., for example, offers returning expats a choice of locations, plus assistance on finding a suitable role.

### Start Networking

When you're ready to find a job in the U.S., focus first on your network of contacts. If you've stayed in touch with former managers, peers, friends and recruiters, your efforts will be much easier.

"The lack of an effective network is by far the greatest challenge most [job hunters] face in finding a role at home after living abroad," says Bob Tinley of the Army Career and Alumni Program in Hannover, Germany. "It can cost them up to a year during their search."

Even if you're staying within your company, having contacts is essential. If you don't have a mentor to champion your return to the U.S., you should develop one. Tim Hope, an executive with an advertising company in San Jose, Calif., says that when he returned from a European assignment, "having a person representing my interests and keeping my name in people's minds at corporate headquarters was critical."

With new technology, such as e-mail, faxing and the Internet, it's easy to maintain contact around the world. The Internet also is a great source of information on the job market and specific U.S. businesses. It should be supplemented with a thorough review of trade and technical publications in your field, major newspapers, such as the International Herald Tribune, and local papers from the area where you want to live. Also, try to attend trade shows for your industry, where making new contacts should come naturally.

As you hone your knowledge of the U.S. marketplace before returning, be open to developing new skills. These could include learning new software, hot management techniques or communication styles. Taking courses locally or via computer and phone from a U.S. university could fill the bill.

### Develop a Campaign

Once you understand the market and can target your skills effectively, it's time to create a marketing campaign. With the increased attention being placed on globalization, your international experience may be a big plus to employers.

Experiences you might highlight in your resume and cover letters include an understanding of international market needs; demonstrated ability to work effectively with people of other cultures; foreign language and general communication skills; a flexible management style; and the ability to work independently in a visible, responsible role (which describes most international assignments).

When developing your resume and supporting materials, remember that interviewers you meet (including recruiters) may have limited knowledge of the international business arena. "Be ready to explain to management the importance of your international experience and the value you can bring to the company," says Rick Davis, who spent two years in an expat assignment with California-based Plantronics Co. "Otherwise, you're just another candidate."

With your resume and cover letter completed, you're ready to begin searching. Even if your company has guaranteed you a role upon your return, you should build your U.S. network by writing to recruiters and potential employers about your experience and return date. Studies show that first jobs back often don't work out, so many expats seek new roles within a year of returning.

Create a direct-mail campaign using lists from your local consulate or industry organization, local offices of targeted companies, the Internet and your network. Since your international experience is a differentiating factor, you may want to focus on U.S. organizations with operations abroad. There are many

directories and databases available via the internet and through company career centers.

As you prepare your campaign, remember that you're competing with local candidates, so you need to tell a particularly strong story. A recruiter receiving a resume from abroad will include that person in the pool of candidates for suitable positions if specific international experience is needed. The skills that person possesses may outweigh the additional costs and logistical difficulties of interviewing someone who lives abroad.

To boost your attractiveness, try to minimize logistical difficulties. This can be as simple as renting a voice mailbox in the U.S. (from the phone company), and including this number as well as your international fax number and e-mail address on your resume. Or, you could suggest having an initial interview via video-conferencing (you can rent a video room in most major cities).

Finally, be prepared for some hard work. Due to time differences, you may need to start your day very early or work late into the night to make follow-up calls and participate in telephone interviews. Bart Trevor, now in Santa Clara, Calif., found he needed to dedicate several hours in the early morning each day to his job search while living in Europe. "Although this meant I was on the phone at 4 a.m. local time, it worked."

You should also plan at least two trips to the U.S. "Technology is great to an extent, but really selling yourself and effectively negotiating your next position requires a few face-to-face meetings," says Tim Hall.

#### **Negotiating Tips**

After you've received an offer, you're ready to start negotiating compensation and benefits. While it's unreasonable to expect the same package you're receiving abroad, your moving costs, repatriation expenses (hotel stays while house-hunting, a rental car, tax preparation fees, etc.) should be paid by your new employer. And since the repatriation itself will be an adjustment, it's important that the total compensation package is equitable for your level of experience and international expertise.

As you and your family begin preparing for your return, be sure to plan for and take steps to minimize the cultural adjustment. One woman lived and worked in London before returning to the U.S. "You should recognize there will be a shock factor and talk aloud as a family about how different it will be," she says. "Make sure you and your children get friends' addresses to remain in touch with your international life. And, since you may find you miss the adrenaline rush of overcoming the challenges of living abroad, be open to new hobbies and activities to add excitement to your U.S. lifestyle."

Dan French and his wife found it helpful to "bring some of the European culture back with us. For example, instead of having a quick American meal and rushing off to the shopping mall for entertainment, we still enjoy a leisurely two- to three-hour dinner at a local French restaurant where the waiters now know us by name, similar to our experience in Brussels."

While the adjustment period varies depending on the length of time you were abroad and your family's enjoyment of international life, you should expect the first year to be difficult. Yet, if you've landed a challenging new role, are living in an area that meets your cultural needs and have worked through the adjustment period as a family, you'll agree with Joe Feist, an executive in Allentown, Pa: "Both moving abroad and returning were difficult, but I developed so much professionally and personally from both that I'll never regret it and would happily do it again."

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